



Ambassador Jeffrey L. Bleich – ‘Lincoln’ Premiere

**Remarks of Ambassador Bleich
at Parliamentary Screening of ‘Lincoln’
Parliament House
Canberra**

(As prepared for delivery – March 13, 2013)

It is a pleasure to be with so many members of Parliament tonight, from every political party, to honor a political leader. Whatever differences the people in this room may have, everyone here shares an appreciation for the challenges of leadership, and admiration for those who accept that burden.

Before tonight’s movie begins, the Prime Minister has graciously invited me to share a little context for the film. The film tonight focuses on just a few months of Lincoln’s life, near the end of the Civil War in 1865. While many members of Parliament may already be familiar with Lincoln’s story, it may help to know some background in order to fully appreciate the significance of the events in this film, and to see Lincoln as Americans see him.

For Americans, there are few figures in our history as revered as Abraham Lincoln. President Obama calls him our greatest President; and, indeed, every President since Lincoln has stood in the shadow of Lincoln’s greatness. More books have been written about Abraham Lincoln than about any other American. Even today, nearly 150 years after his death, there are two top-grossing films out about him – although one is about him being a Vampire Slayer.

Of course, part of Lincoln’s legacy is his personal tale – a classically American story of overcoming the odds. Born in a one-room log cabin in Kentucky, he had a tough upbringing. His mother died when he was nine, his father was poor, and he grew up without any formal schooling. Through hard work, he taught himself how to read and write – eventually becoming a formidable lawyer, orator, and thinker. Born skinny, he made himself physically strong splitting rails and became a renowned wrestler. He had many professional failures as a young man, including a failed attempt at running a general store and several failed runs at political office. But each failure only seemed to increase his resolve and make him work harder, so that by 1856, in his mid-40s, he’d become a respected lawyer and political figure.



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But that inspiring personal history is not why American’s revere Lincoln. We have known many people rise from humble beginnings in America to achieve high office.

What we admire in Lincoln is something even more rare and uncommon in his character: selflessness. In the final four years of his life, he demonstrated a devotion to public service so profound that it brought out that same devotion in others.

The events that revealed the true character of Abraham Lincoln and that changed the course of American history began in 1860. That year, having just lost his race for the U.S. Senate for a second time, he decided – ironically -- to run for President. He was considered the least likely of the four candidates in his own party who were seeking the nomination. The leading candidate, William Seward, was so confident of victory, that he actually spent most of the summer before the primary in Europe getting acquainted with other heads of state. The two other candidates, Salmon Chase and Edward Bates, were both long shots, but they took comfort that at least they were well ahead of Lincoln. However, through a brilliantly orchestrated campaign at the convention, Lincoln won a stunning victory on the third ballot. His three rivals were shocked, and considered his selection a terrible mistake. Prominent members of both parties mocked him. A former Attorney General, Edwin Stanton, referred to him as “that long-armed creature.”

Having won the primary, he was thrust into the election of 1860 -- the most divided in U.S. history. Some media pundits like to claim that the U.S. is divided today. Let me describe “divided.” Lincoln did not win a single vote in 10 of the 15 Southern slave states; indeed he won only two counties in all of the 996 counties in the South. And so as the votes were being counted, the battle lines for a war were already being drawn. Before Lincoln was sworn in, several Southern States voted to secede from the Union, and formed a new Confederacy with their own President, Jefferson Davis. Lincoln’s life was threatened. On the way to DC for his swearing in, he’d already had to escape one assassination plot. And on April 12, 1861, just a month after he took office, the first shots of the war were fired on Union troops at Fort Sumter: and America was at war with itself.

And so Abraham Lincoln became the President of the United States who would either save the Union or preside over its disintegration. It was at this defining moment, that he demonstrated the temperament that has inspired our nation ever since. Lincoln determined to save the Union, and no political difference, no personal slight, no threat to his life, no personal tragedy, nothing, not even his reverence for the law and the Constitution would stop him from doing whatever was necessary to preserve the United States.

He knew he needed the very best people around him. And so as soon as he took office, he asked the men he considered the best qualified – his fierce rivals, Seward, Chase, and



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Bates -- to serve in his Cabinet. They all refused at first, because they considered him unworthy to be President. But he convinced them, one by one, that even if they did not believe that he deserved to be President, they owed it to their Country to help him govern. As the war intensified, he added another rival Stanton – who not only belonged to the rival party, but who was the very man that had called Lincoln a “long armed creature” -- to serve as his Secretary of War. Each of them tried to undermine him. But rather than fire them, he turned the other cheek, and inspired them to do the same. Seward, who you will see in the film as Lincoln’s close advisor would later say that Lincoln’s “magnanimity is almost superhuman. Over the course of the war, he converted this team of rivals into his greatest admirers and defenders. Indeed, at Lincoln's death, Stanton said simply: "There lies the most perfect ruler of men the world has ever seen."

Throughout the war Lincoln employed every resource within his power – both high and low – to prosecute the war. Every decision he made was second guessed. He fired a series of failed generals before settling on General Ulysses S. Grant. When advisers objected to Grant, complaining that Grant drank so much whiskey, Lincoln told them to find out what whiskey Grant drank, so that he could send it to all of his other Generals.

The human cost of the war was staggering. America lost more men in the Civil War than in every other war we have fought combined. The political abuse and ridicule heaped on President Lincoln was savage and ruthless. At the same time, Lincoln suffered the worst personal tragedy that any parent can imagine. His son, Willie, died and his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, became clinically depressed in her grief. Even as the tide of the war turned in favor of the North, the terrible casualties grew heavier. And the bodies of America’s young soldiers many still just teenagers, were buried daily in Arlington Cemetery, on a hill visible from the grounds of the White House.

It is at this moment, that tonight’s film begins. With victory finally in sight, and the South nearly broken, President Lincoln -- having suffered as no American President has ever suffered to save the Union -- faced his greatest challenge. He needed to remake the Union -- to eliminate slavery once and for all, and to bring the people of our Country -- black and white, north and south, rebel and union -- together despite the bitter legacy of slavery and the terrible bloodshed of the war.

Re-elected to a second term, he did not trumpet his victory or condemn his enemies. Instead, addressing those who had sought to destroy the Union, he directed malice toward none of them; and offered charity for all of them. He uttered these words:

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his



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orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

That is why we love and revere Abraham Lincoln.

Once again, my thanks to PM Gillard for inviting me here to join you this evening.